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Haig's Commanding Start

He takes charge firmly and talks tough

Meeting at the State Department last week, Secretary Alexander Haig and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger agreed to get together regularly to discuss foreign affairs. Conspicuously not invited to the planned sessions: Richard Allen, the President's National Security Adviser. Indeed, Allen has been maintaining such a low profile—as he promised before taking the job—and has been so slow in filling top-level posts in his office that other agencies concerned with overseas affairs are apprehensive. Says an adviser: "They are afraid that Allen will let Al Haig run away with the whole show."

Haig began threatening to do so on Inauguration Day. He handed Presidential Counsellor Edwin Meese a proposal to consolidate the making of foreign policy within the State Department; the National Security Council staff and other agencies would play distinctly secondary roles. The plan was too ambitious even for Reagan, who had promised to make Haig the chief formulator of foreign policy. Meese set to work on an amended version that gives some protection to other agencies.

But Reagan never gave Haig a firm no, and, like any bold technocrat, the Secretary interpreted this as a green light to begin putting his ideas into action. He arrived at State with half a dozen or so trusted associates, who helped him quickly assemble a crew of experienced assistants and deputies. "My nominees," he has pointedly called them, despite White House aides' reminders that they were really presidential appointments.

Haig has come on strong not only with actions but with the positions he has taken. At his first press conference as Secretary of State, he shocked many foreign policy experts by bluntly accusing the Soviet Union of "training, funding and equipping" international terrorists. What evidence did Haig have for his charge? Haig admitted in an interview with the *New Republic* that "one of the problems we have faced in this field is the lack of first-rate intelligence."

The next day, State Department Spokesman William Dyess said that besides directly arming and training elements of the Palestine Liberation Organization, for which experts say there is abundant evidence, the Soviets have indirectly helped terrorist organizations through surrogates such as Libya and Cuba. But Dyess said Haig actually was using the word terrorism rather loosely to include Soviet support of "national liberation movements" and propaganda advocating "armed struggle," as in El Salvador and Namibia. All of this can be broadly defined as terrorism, Dyess claimed, because it "creates a climate in which terrorism flourishes." Despite Dyess's attempt to soften Haig's accusation, it set off a sharp debate. Said Georgetown University Professor Walter Laqueur, an expert on terrorism: "I sympathize with Haig's sentiments, but I regret the lack of precision in his words. It is very difficult to know what he means."

There seems to be no question that the terrorist groups of more than a decade ago, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Black September movement, depended on the Soviet-allied countries of Syria, Iraq, Libya and South Yemen for training, money and arms. Some also trained in Czechoslovakia and even the Soviet Union. Other groups, such as the Japanese Red Army and Italy's Red Brigades, have more tenuous Soviet links.

The Soviets furiously deny aiding international terrorists, but boast proudly of supporting "national liberation movements," a distinction Haig does not make. Soviet and Cuban involvement in El Salvador, for example, has become increasingly evident in recent weeks. Documents captured by Salvadoran authorities describe a trip by guerrilla leaders to the Soviet Union, Viet Nam, Ethiopia and several Eastern European countries, during which they obtained commitments from Communist leaders for weapons and uniforms. According to U.S. intelligence officials, deliveries are handled by Cuba, often through Nicaragua. The Administration intends to make Soviet-bloc support of the guerrillas in El Salvador a major issue in East-West relations. A delegation of top State Department and CIA officials, led by Lawrence Eagleburger, Haig's choice as Assistant Secretary of State for Europe, will go to European capitals this week to demonstrate for NATO allies the need for greater U.S. military aid to the government of El Salvador. Another U.S. delegation will seek backing from friendly governments in Latin America.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin escalated its war of words with the U.S. by releasing the text of a letter from Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to Haig, accusing the U.S. of "open interference" in Poland and of making "distorted interpretations" of Soviet propaganda beamed at Iran. America's European allies are concerned that the Administration's verbal confrontation with Moscow will destabilize East-West relations. The West Germans, for example, fear that the U.S. will pressure them to cancel plans to buy Soviet natural gas in return for high-technology goods. In addition, U.S. allies in Europe would like an early resumption of salt negotiations, which seems unlikely.

Some U.S. foreign policy analysts fear that the Administration may be putting too high a priority on terrorism at the expense of dealing with Moscow's more worrisome invasion of Afghanistan and troop build-ups near Poland. There is also increasing concern among some experts that Haig is talking too tough, no matter how much the White House may agree with his sentiments. Last week the Secretary of State faced only one serious challenge to his clenched-teeth statements: he had to make an emergency visit to his dentist after damaging a tooth.

—By Walter Isaacson. Reported by Roberto Suro/Washington